

God Vs. Sweet Briar College:

The First Decades 1901-1921

Professor Berg's SB History Class

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“Almost all private women’s colleges in the south were affiliated with religious bodies.”¹ Most women’s colleges in the south after the 1900s were very religious. Most colleges mandated chapel attendance, or required a certain number of credit hours in religion to graduate. Between 1900 and the late 1920s there was no question of whether or not to go to church in the south; people just went because it was tradition. Why does the South have more colleges with church affiliations than the North, especially among women’s colleges? Some historians feel its “pedestal ideology” which means keeping the past in the present. Meaning that the parents of the daughters that would attend the colleges would want their daughters to keep church as part of their future as it was a major part in the past.

Sweet Briar College was founded at the turn of the century (1901), but unlike other women’s colleges of the South, Sweet Briar was not affiliated with a certain church. Still there was a mandatory church attendance among its students. What were the students’ and the professors’ feelings about this? How was religion handled at Sweet Briar? Was there a religion class you had to take to graduate? Since the archives contain are limited sources on the beginning years of the college (1901-1920), this paper will concentrate on religion over a longer period at Sweet Briar, from its founding until 1921.

When Indiana Fletcher Williams died in 1901 she left a will to found a new institution. She left the board with one big lingering question: should Sweet Briar be affiliated with a specific religion? Indiana’s will does not say what religion the school should be, only that “religious training as shall in the judgment of the Directors best fit them to be useful members of society.” It was well known that Indiana was Episcopal

¹ McCandless, Amy Thompson. “Restriction on Social Life’ at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1940”, *History of Higher Education Annual*, 7(1987) page 93.

and attended St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Lynchburg. With four of the seven members on the board being Reverends, one would expect Sweet Briar to be affiliated due to such a religious presence. This was not the case, however. The board decided that the school would be non-denominational since it was not stated in Indiana's will.²

This decision was important because it did not give an outline to not have a religion rule it. The decision on chapel made it so the students that would attend in 1906 would not be limited to what religion the school was. The students could feel comfortable if they were not the religion the school was. It also gave leeway to what the preacher of the daily and Sunday sermon could teach, with not restricting it to a certain religion. The day before the school opened in 1906 the faculty got together to make some decisions of their own.

They held was the first faculty meeting of Sweet Briar College on 25 September 1906. One of the subjects brought up was aspects chapel, since at that time there was no chaplain at the school who would teach the sermons. Dr. Benedict, the first President of Sweet Briar College, suggested that the professors do the sermons. The professors would preach on a cycle, switching every week, according to the way their names appeared in the "Course of Instruction".³

Though the professors would not to preach to the students according to a certain religious preference, there was still the idea that someone should be preaching the sermons. Thus, it was still important that the students keep with the "pedestal ideology" and keep with the standards of the past: church.

When the school officially opened to the students on the 26 September 1906, the

² *The Sweet Briar Institute*. (Syracuse N.Y., 1904).

³ Faculty Minutes Sweet Briar College. Vol. I (1906-1911), entry of 25-9-1906. Sweet Briar College Archives.

rules for chapel that these new students would face were very demanding. Even though the school did not have a religious affiliation it did keep teaching the principles of Christianity to the students. The new students were required to go to daily chapel at seven at night. Church services were held on every Sunday of the month but the first one, when they were allowed to attend church in the surrounding area. It was mandatory that all students go to Bible class that was held every Sunday, and the professor of English taught it.⁴

The Faculty probably thought it was a good idea because the idea of that's what has been going on at other southern colleges forever so we should not have it here. It might have also been that it made it easier for parents to send their daughters knowing that morals and values would be upheld through proper daily church exercises. It was also important for the faculty to let the students go somewhere once in a while that was more comfortable for them: a church of the students' own denomination.

On that first day, students signed up for classes from the standard list of courses. Religion was not one of them since the school did not have a religion department. There was, though, an elective under the English department you could take called the literary study of the Bible-Old Testament. The class was an elective for juniors and seniors, (even though the school did not graduate its first five students until 1910).⁵ How did the students feel about the idea of religion at this time period?

The First Student Government Association (SGA) started in 1906 and these students had some control over the rules they wanted to set for themselves, one of which

⁴ Sweet Briar College, *Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1906-1911*. Sweet Briar, 1911.

⁵ Sweet Briar College, *Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1906-1911*. Sweet Briar, 1911.

was the punishments for over cutting chapel. In the First Printing of the *Constitution and By-Laws of the SGA of Sweet Briar College, 1906* the rules for cutting chapel were: "For one unexcused absence from chapel students shall be summoned before the Executive Committee. For two she shall be put on probation. For three she shall be suspended from the Association and put under Faculty supervision for two weeks."⁶ Though SGA did not have any control over how many times they could cut without permission and no cutting was allowed in 1906, they were at least allowed to choose their punishment. The Faculty had final approval of the punishment and they agreed on these sanctions.

In 1908, there was once again still no religion department, but neither was the class in the English department offered again. Instead, the History department added Comparative Religion. That class was about the study of some of the great religions in the world, and it compared every one of them to Christianity. Again this was only a senior elective.⁷ This is important because it compared other religions to Christianity to the students'. It might be one-sided but it did show the students that Christianity is not the only religion in the world. This would be the last year that a class pertaining to religion would be taught in History until the arrival of a chaplain in 1909.

When Reverend Wallace E. Rollins arrived at Sweet Briar for his first year in 1909, he had his work cut out for him. He was the first professor of a new department. He was also taking over chapel services that were before alternated between the professors. The classes he chose to add were "History of the Bible: the history of the canon of the Old and New Testament," which was a senior elective. "The Teachings of Christ and the Life of Paul," which were only junior and senior electives. He kept

⁶ *SGA Handbooks*, ed. YWCA (Lynchburg, VA: 1906).

⁷ Sweet Briar College, *Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1906-1911*. Sweet Briar, 1911.

Comparative Religion, but moved it into the new Biblical and Literature Department. Wallace also added a second service to Sunday, and the students at Sweet Briar were required to attend both on Sunday. Wallace also arranged new Sunday school classes. They were called "elective work," and they counted towards a B.A. degree. These Sunday school classes were open to all students and were called: studies in the gospel of Mark, studies in the book of acts, and studies of the Young Woman's Christian association (which was new to Sweet Briar then).

When Sweet Briar opened these classes were not required. Since there was not a department for Biblical Literature there was no need to make it mandatory because there were no professors to teach. So there were elective classes set up. When Wallace came in 1909 there was a change not only in the number of classes in the Biblical and Literature (not a major or a minor) department, but also in the Sunday school classes. Though they were merely electives classes, they were strongly recommended, along with daily chapel and Sunday chapel. For years this was the standard in the course curriculum in Biblical and Literature. Also, the rules for skipping chapel were almost the same except the rules got slowly stricter each year. Until in 1913 when the strictness reached its limit.

The year 1913 in the school was very strict religiously. Wallace was out and the new Reverend Thomas Deane Lewis was stricter. The Rules in the *Student Handbook* states the punishments for allowed absences from chapel (at that time only three a month). "A.) For one over cut a student shall be considered in bad standing with the

SGA and campused⁸ for a period of five weeks. B.) For second over cut (the) student shall be publicly reprimanded, considered in bad standing with the SGA and campused for eight weeks.”⁹ Though there was one break, you did not have to go to church twice on Sunday. Daily devotion was at eight o’clock in the morning so that students could start their days off right.¹⁰ Everything else was kept the same from the earlier years regarding Sunday school and elective classes, though there were some new ones replacing previous ones.

These rules that SGA put on the students showed what their views toward religion were in a roundabout way. SGA considered it important to have strict rules for chapel because it was a big part of their lifestyle, or pedestal ideology. This all seemed to change though in 1914. Maybe at this time the students realized that they did not need to live by the ideals of the past anymore.

Change started happening drastically on 23 January 1914 when SGA petitioned the faculty about changing some of the Chapel rules. The students wanted to have daily chapel moved from eight in the morning to six in the afternoon during exam week. They also wanted to have fifteen chapel cuts per semester instead of three per month. The chapel exercises were moved during exam week. The idea for more chapel cuts was accepted but twelve instead of fifteen.¹¹

With Sweet Briar allowing more cuts per semester in 1914, the Faculty started realizing that religion was not all that important for a student to live in the world. The

⁸ Campused = when she (the student) is expected to remain within the following limits: north, the beginning of the woods. East, last house on Faculty row. South, the wind break. West, the grounds immediately around Sweet Briar House.

⁹ *SGA Handbooks*, ed. YWCA (Lynchburg, VA: 1913).

¹⁰ Sweet Briar College, *Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1912-1917*. Sweet Briar, 1917.

¹¹ Faculty Minutes Sweet Briar College. Vol. 4 (1913-1916), entry of 23-1-1914. Sweet Briar College Archives.

faculty did still recognize that it was something the students needed and that is why there are only twelve cuts allowed instead of the fifteen for which the students asked. This was when the students started asking for more and more privileges for chapel.

In 1916, the senior class of 1917 made a wish list for the faculty. They made a few requests and one was related to weekday chapel. The seniors wanted to have the privilege of voluntary chapel for seniors during the weekdays. The faculty ruled that they would grant voluntary attendance for a year as an experiment. If everything went alright, it would stay that way.¹²

In April of 1917, the faculty got together to decide how to provide time for a mid-day service for Good Friday. So the faculty decided that something classes and other scheduled daily events would have to be moved to make this happen. It was decided that the daily chapel service at eight in the morning should be cut for that day to make room. Therefore classes would start at eight in the morning that day and lunch would be moved to 1:30, after the 12:30 service.¹³

In May of 1917 with late arrivals to chapel counting for attendance, it was decided that something should be done. The faculty listened to suggestions and found one that they approved of. They would ring two bells: the first bell was to say that one should be in chapel or on one's way. The second bell signified that if one was not in the chapel one would be considered not present. Even if a student came in just soon after the bell, she would be considered cutting chapel.¹⁴

¹² Faculty Minutes Sweet Briar College. Vol. 5 (1916-1919), entry of 26-9-1916.Sweet Briar College Archives.

¹³ Faculty Minutes Sweet Briar College. Vol. 5 (1916-1919), entry of 4-4-1916.Sweet Briar College Archives.

¹⁴ Faculty Minutes Sweet Briar College. Vol. 5 (1916-1919), entry of 29-5-1916.Sweet Briar College Archives.

When the faculty allowed the senior class to have non-mandatory weekday chapel, it was an effort to keep the students coming to chapel. That way they felt like they had more of a choice and responsibility of their own. The faculty was taking a gamble in hoping the students would stick with the views that the rest of the South wanted them to have and keep coming to chapel regularly. By making the two-bell system students had to make sure they were on time for chapel. This meant that students could not bend the rule by missing half of the service and being counted for being there the whole time. The faculty decided they had to crack down on this before it became commonplace. There were, of course, students that never missed and were also in charge of leading the Bible classes in 1917.

In 1917-1918 Sunday school classes were no longer mandatory anymore. Instead the Bible classes were voluntary and taught by the students in the YWCA club. The YWCA also organized the Sunday Evening Chapel service.¹⁵ Even though the Bible classes were not mandatory under the club list in the student handbook, there was a different feeling from the Missionary Committee, which did things to promote Christianity with the YWCA. "Voluntary study classes in Bible and missions. These classes meet once a week for an hour and follow the course of study laid out by the National Board for the Voluntary Bible and Missions Study classes. Since there are not any Sunday school classes and Bible study is not a requirement of the curriculum, every girl is expected to join a Bible Study class."¹⁶ Also during chapel, the SGA supervised the attitudes of the students to make sure they were being respectful during church.

¹⁵ Sweet Briar College, *Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1912-1917*. Sweet Briar, 1917.

¹⁶ *SGA Handbooks*, ed. YWCA (Lynchburg, VA: 1917).

The YWCA and the Missionary Committee seemed to have control over the religious part of the school club wise. "Every girl is expected to join a Bible Study class."¹⁷ If a freshman saw that, she might think: Is it what every student does? Instead of deciding on their own if they wanted to take a class or not they were forced by peer pressure. These two clubs might have been forcing their views on others to preserve what has been done all along at the school. The faculty in 1919 started looking into was of giving the students more decisions on their own about chapel attendance.

The subject of making voluntary chapel attendance came up in a faculty meeting in 1919. President McVea said that when she was at a conference over the summer the subject of compulsory chapel was brought up. McVea read to the faculty the results from this topic. The President decided that voluntary chapel would be tried out during the week. The attendance for Sunday chapel would remain mandatory.¹⁸

The decision to let the students have mandatory chapel attendance on Sundays and voluntary on the weekends gave the students a chance to make their own decision. They were given the chance to start stepping off the pedestal. Though it was only a trial run, it was still an opportunity for the students at Sweet Briar. In the following months there were many things the faculty had to deal with regarding the chapel.

In October of 1919 the question of excusing students from the Sweet Briar church services on Sunday was brought up in the Faculty Minutes by the SGA. The students asked to be excused from the Sweet Briar Sunday chapel so that they could attend services in Amherst. The faculty did not vote on it; instead it was expressed throughout

¹⁷ Sweet Briar College, *Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1912-1917*. Sweet Briar, 1917.

¹⁸ Faculty Minutes Sweet Briar College. Vol. 6 (1919-1923), entry of 15-9-1919. Sweet Briar College Archives.

the faculty that they did not approve. So it was denied without a vote.¹⁹ In that same month the senior class got a warning from the faculty for their attendance in church on Sunday, therefore failing to present itself well as a role model. The class got a warning and the faculty talked to the president of SGA. If it did not get better, there would be changes made to the existing rules.²⁰

When SGA asked to have the choice of attending a church service somewhere else in Amherst, they were denied, most likely because it was the only day of the week that the students had to go to chapel. If they attended off campus, there would be no way of checking unless chaperones went with every student. Therefore, the students were limited to what religion they could follow. Though the senior class did start abusing their privileges in 1919 after behaving for three years, it would not be long before their actions would affect the whole college. The seniors did not think that they needed to keep the past part of the present. Because chapel was considered one of the things that kept the students "on the pedestal," they started showing up in fewer numbers at chapel. It was not by force; it was their own will. What did this mean for the next school year?

There was not a chaplain anymore in the 1920-1921 school year. M. Elizabeth J. Czarnomska took over the job of teaching the Biblical and Literature department, adding classes as she saw fit. Since there was not a chaplain anymore President McVea took over the duty of conducting the weekday services. For the Sunday services a visiting

¹⁹ Faculty Minutes Sweet Briar College. Vol. 6 (1919-1923), entry of 8-10-1919. Sweet Briar College Archives.

²⁰ Faculty Minutes Sweet Briar College. Vol. 6 (1919-1923), entry of 27-8-1919. Sweet Briar College Archives.

minister would come to preach. The YWCA still had its evening services for all that wished to attend.²¹

In October 1920, the president gave a report, with the amount of students that were taking classes in each department. It was reported that Sweet Briar offered 74 courses that fall semester, and of those courses there were only 26 students enrolled in the Biblical and Literature department. It is interesting that there were only 26 students taking Bible because it means that they did not consider it a very important class. Classes that were considered more meaningful were being taken, such as: hygiene, modern languages, English and history. Bible enrollment was in low ranks with chemistry (45) and physics (21).²² This might reflect the fact that the seniors had the majority of the electives in the Biblical and Literature department, and they had a problem with chapel.

Again the seniors were brought up for their action in chapel. A small number of their class represented them in church on Sunday. The president said that the seniors were often not at chapel on Sundays. President McVea then asked the secretary of the faculty to write a letter to the senior class asking them to "be more regular in attendance."²³

The fact that the senior class was not attending the Sunday services was important because it made the school look bad when a visiting minister came to preach. If the majority of the class was not there in attendance it said something negative about Sweet Briar. The faculty started looking at what other colleges were doing with their departments especially the Biblical and Literature department.

²¹ Sweet Briar College, *Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1918-1922*. Sweet Briar, 1922.

²² Faculty Minutes Sweet Briar College. Vol. 6 (1919-1923), entry of 12-8-1920. Sweet Briar College Archives.

²³ Faculty Minutes Sweet Briar College. Vol. 6 (1919-1923), entry of 24-11-1920. Sweet Briar College Archives.

While the faculty had been reviewing other college catalogs to see what they were doing differently in 1921, Czaromskas gave a small presentation about her department. She felt that Bible should not become a requirement (it was not before 1921) at Sweet Briar because the number of credit hours the students had to take was already overwhelming. Since there was also no distinct call for Bible to be a requirement by the faculty, students, alumnae, or the board of directors, it should not even have been considered. She felt that if Sweet Briar made it mandatory it would not have the result that the school was looking for. Czarnomskas then finished her presentation with her knowledge of the value of the courses in the Biblical department, and she urged the Major professors to give Bible as a recommendation to students for an elective whenever possible.²⁴

In 1921, after a short period of lenient chapel exercises, the *Student Handbook* started to get stricter again. Instead of twelve chapel cuts a semester there were only nine, and Sundays counted as two cuts. The penalty for over-cutting was one serious report. Chapel cuts were excused for one of two reasons: sickness that took a student to the infirmary, or absence from the campus longer than 24 hours.²⁵

The rules in the Student Handbook for the year 1921 regarding chapel were shockingly different from the years before. Something was happening. Perhaps the student body started rebelling, and the faculty had to buckle down on them. Maybe the students stepped too far off the pedestal and it started scaring the faculty and parents. What better way to crack down but remind them about morals and values taught by Christ? Remind the students of what life is supposed to be like, with the pedestal of

²⁴ Faculty Minutes Sweet Briar College. Vol. 6 (1919-1923), entry of 15-2-1921. Sweet Briar College Archives.

²⁵ *SGA Handbooks*, ed. YWCA (Lynchburg, VA: 1921).

course. Another reason could be that McVea, the President of Sweet Briar, at that time was considered very conservative and religious and to her maybe she wanted all the students at Sweet Briar to observe Christ and make sure the students kept their right foot forward. She was also the new reverend since the school did not hire another one.

Lastly, in 1921 it was stated in the handbooks that it was mandatory that during Sunday chapel students were not allowed to ride horses, ride or drive in an automobile, go to Lynchburg, or be outside walking. If a date arrived early on Sunday to pick up his date, he would be made to go to church with her, without exception. That taught a man to be early.

Sweet Briar in its founding did not have a religious affiliation, but it did have religion. Though for a while it seemed very strict from 1906-1913, the years of the middle to late teens show that the school decided to let the students have responsibility. The students as a whole, at that time, seemed rebel and petitioned for more cuts from chapel. To those students it was more important to also take other classes other than Bible. It seems that the faculty agreed, since during the early years of the college there was not even a Biblical and Literature department. During that time there was also never a requirement to take those classes. In the early years it was a requirement to take a Sunday school, class but in 1917 it was decided that it was not mandatory anymore. It was just peer pressure that kept it alive. Mandatory chapel during the week was done away with for a while but it returned again in 1921 with fewer cuts. It appears that because the senior class got two warnings about abusing their no mandatory chapel during the week, the rest of the students might have tried the same thing. And if the whole school rebelled it might be made mandatory again so that the students stayed with

the idea of “pedestal ideology”. The students that went to Sweet Briar did not seem to grasp the idea of mandatory chapel every day as well as the faculty would have liked. Even though the faculty knew that mandatory chapel was not a major facet of the college life. They did know that it was needed to help parents send their daughters there and to make sure that they kept their morals and views straight.

Work Cited Primary Source

Faculty Minutes Sweet Briar College. Vol. I (1906-1911), Vol. 4 (1913-1916) Vol. 5 (1916-1919) Vol. 6 (1919- 1923) Vol. 7 (1923-1925) Vol. 8 (1925-1929) Vol. 9 (1929-1934). Sweet Briar College Archives. Far right shelf near window, second shelf from the bottom. The faculty minutes have everything in them from what the new Faculty thought the school colors should be to students giving excuses for arriving late back from break. Since I was looking for a faculty perspective on religion this proved to be a good source. Being that it showed how the faculty changed the rules for first the seniors and then the underclassmen. They talked about a good many things that helped me with their views and the students too which surprised me.

Sweet Briar College, *Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1906-1989*. Sweet Briar. Third shelf from the front left side. Second and third shelf down. The college catalogues, in the early years called *Year Books* were helpful in that there was a list of all the faculty members, classes, and majors. There was also another section that had things that a student would need to know about the college before she came, like athletics and chapel times. The catalogues helped me with the Chapel information and the classes helped me find out if it was a major concern to the college or not.

SGA Handbooks, ed. YWCA (Lynchburg, VA:1906-2001). Third shelf from the front left side. Third and fourth shelf down. The handbooks have in them all the rules of

the college as made by the SGA. In the rules it also lists the punishments for doing certain things. In the handbook that helped me because I was looking for a students perspective on the whole idea of religion. What better way then the rules they make for themselves if they over cut chapel?

The Sweet Briar Institute. (Syracuse, N.Y., 1904). In archives room #2 on right side second shelf from the back window. Third shelf from the bottom. This helped me in learn about the views and the creation on the college from the beginning. In it are many things like what the school thought the architecture should be and so forth. It helped me in that it gave explanations for the religious chose the college made. It also gave me the religious views of the founder of the college Indiana Fletcher Williams.

Work Cited Secondary Source

McCandless, Amy Thompson. "Restriction on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1940", *History of Higher Education Annual*, 7(1987)^{pag (91-96)}. This source was used for the based of my paper and it is about many other all female colleges of that time period.